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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the national movement toward increasing high school graduation requirements and the development of alternatives to the standard high school diploma for students with disabilities. Findings from a review of state policies indicate: (1) 38 states and territories apply some graduation requirements to students with disabilities; (2) 9 states require all students regardless of their disability to meet all requirements for a standard diploma; (3) 9 states reported that students with mild disabilities must meet all requirements for a diploma; (4) 11 states reported that graduation requirements for all students with disabilities are determined locally, guided by the students' individualized education programs (IEPs); and (5) six states permit requirements for students with severe disabilities to be determined or waived by the students' IEPs. A chart illustrates graduation diploma options for students with disabilities in Florida. (Contains 16 references.) (CR)

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A Comparison of Graduation Requirements

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Summary

Over the past few years, many states have increased the requirements for attaining a standard diploma. Changes include increases in the number of credits required for graduation, higher academic standards, and the addition of exit exams. This is not a new phenomenon, but rather part of a recurring cycle in educational policies/politics. A similar emphasis on more rigorous graduation requirements occurred in the 1980s when nearly half of the states (47.9%) reported new policies on required number of units for graduation; and more states began prescribing the number and types of courses students must take and pass in order to graduate from high school (Bodner, Clark, & Mellard, 1987).

The pace and direction of the changes in graduation requirements appears to be somewhat different since 1995. For example, the number of states requiring an exit examination for graduation has increased from 15 in 1989 to 17 in 1996. It increased from 17 to 22 by 1998. The average number of Carnegie units required for graduation has gone up 2.5 points just since 1996. Half of all states (25) show increases with only one showing a decrease.

We do not know what effect these changes will have on students with disabilities, but we would be foolish to believe that there will be no impact. Some states are developing options for students with disabilities to provide them with more alternatives to successful transition to adult life. Florida is an example of a state who has developed two alternatives to the standard diploma: (1) a credit-based diploma and (2) an employment and community skills competency-based diploma. Prior to the most recent increase in graduation requirements, most Florida school districts report limited use of option 2. There will be a need to scrutinize the effects of diploma options on graduation rates and other measures of transition as the full impact of the more stringent graduation requirements begin to be felt across the nation.

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Units Required for Graduation
25 states raised the number of Carnegie units required for graduation since 1996. The average increase was 2.8 units with a range of 1 to 6 units. The median increase was 2.5 units.

Year	1996	1998
range	1-22	10-24
median	18 5	20

1996

Credits Required	Number of States	Percent of States
21+	6	13%
16-20	30	63%
11-15	7	14%
1-10	5	10%

1998

21+	18	40%
16-20	19	42%
11-15	4	9%
1-10	3	7%

Note: Five states leave this decision to local school board discretion (Colorado, Iowa. Massachusetts, Michigan, Nebraska)
Some states prescribe core requirements and leave the remainder to the local school boards (e.g., Illinois, California, New York, Vermont, and Wisconsin)
One was under revision in 1998 (Pennsylvania)

States requiring exit exams

Year	1987	1998	In development
Number	15	22	7

Types of course requirements

Number of States specifying core credits for graduation

Number	Type	1996 states	1998 states
4 credits	English	42	40
3 credits	English	7	8
2.5 - 4 credits	math	20	24
2 credits	math	26	23
2.5 - 4 credits	science	12	16
2 credits	science	31	28
3-4 credits of social	studies	31	33

Status of State Level Graduation Policies on Students with Disabilities

38 states and territories apply some graduation requirements to students with disabilities

9 states require all students regardless of their disability to meet all requirements for a standard diploma

9 states reported that students with mild disabilities must meet all requirements for a diploma

11 states reported that graduation requirements for all students with disabilities are determined locally, guided by the students' IEP.

6 states permit requirements for students with severe disabilities to be determined or waived by the students' IEPs.

From "Students with Disabilities and High School Graduation Policies", National Association of State Boards of Education Policy Update, 1997.

Diploma Options for Students with Disabilities in Florida

Standard Diploma	Special Option 1	Special Option 2
Required credits in subject areas, including Algebra or other higher level math course	Required credits in subject areas	Successful completion of the goals and objectives on the student's IEP
Successful passage of High School Competency Test	Mastery of Student Performance Standards for the student's exceptionality	Mastery of employment and community competencies as specified on the student's Graduation Plan
2.0 GPA	2.0 GPA	Successful employment for at least one semester
		16 years of age or older

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